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Here's to Better Soviet Intelligence

By ERNEST CONINE

Yuri V. Andropov, the ex-secret police chief who led the Soviet Union for 15 months, has gone to whatever reward awaits Kremlin politicians in the hereafter. But one question that lives after him is pertinent to the outside world's dealings with his successor: How could a man who was so clued into Soviet intelligence make such gross blunders in his assessment of political reality in the outside world?

Exhibit A was the clumsy, heavy-handed attempt to interfere in the West German elections in March, 1983. The Soviets openly supported the out-of-office Social Democrats while loudly warning that incumbent Chancellor Helmut Kohl and his ruling Christian Democrats were leading the German people to the "nuclear gallows."

Kohl confounded the Russians by winning a decisive victory.

The Kremlin was in the process of committing the same sort of blunder with regard to the American presidential elections when Andropov died.

For months now Soviet officials have told visiting journalists and scholars that Ronald Reagan is a monster, that the Kremlin could not and would not deal with him, and that U.S.-Soviet relations stood to remain in a dangerous state as long as he was President.

It was quite clear that the Kremlin under Andropov wanted to help elect a new American President who would be more to their liking. Any high-school civics teacher could have told the Russians that such a tactic would almost surely backfire.

The Andropov government was incredibly ham-handed, too, in its handling of the arms-control issue.

The Soviets were the early beneficiaries of some careless rhetoric that left many Europeans persuaded that Reagan was a reckless cowboy who was not really interested in curbing nuclear weapons. But the Russians threw away the advantage.

By abruptly walking out of the Euro-missile talks, by refusing to set a date for renewal of the strategic arms reduction talks (START) and by conducting a transparent fright campaign, they made it very difficult for anybody in Europe to believe that the U.S. President was the main obstacle to agreement.

Meanwhile, Moscow was unwilling to let well enough alone in the West German anti-nuclear movement. Soviet-controlled "Marxist-Leninists" have tried so blatantly to assert control, preventing any criticism of Soviet missile deployment in the process, that moderate elements are being alienated.

This is hardly what most people expected when Andropov took over the Soviet leadership after the death of Leonid I. Brezhnev in late 1982. Expert observers dared hope that here at last was a Soviet leader whose experience would enable him to make more sophisticated judgments than the primitives who preceded him.

No one rises to be the head man in the Soviet Union, of course, without paying his dues in the school of brass-knuckle politics.

Andropov began as a Volga boatman (literally), and went on to make his mark as a young Communist Party commissar in territory seized from Finland in the winter war of 1939-40.

After the war he underwent intensive ideological training in Moscow, then went to Budapest in 1953 as a counselor in the Soviet embassy. He was ambassador to Hungary when the 1956 uprising was brutally crushed by Soviet troops. In the words of a former Hungarian official, it was Andropov who "decided who and how many people should be executed."

He must have done his job well, for in 1957 he was promoted to be the Soviet Communist Party's watchdog over other Communist governments—a sort of super proconsul of the Soviet empire. A decade later he became chairman of the KGB secret police. He held that job almost 15 years—a period marked by a crackdown on Soviet dissidents and the mounting of a massive campaign of industrial espionage in the West.

Optimists pointed out, however, that Andropov had tolerated the evolution in Hungary of the most far-reaching economic reforms in the Soviet Bloc. And as head of the KGB he obviously was exposed to reams of information about the West. It seemed to follow that he might be more knowledgeable and flexible than previous Soviet leaders in dealing with the world outside the closed society of the Soviet Union.

Why didn't things work out as expected?

One possible explanation is that Andropov, because of his illness, never really called the shots anyway, that the mistakes in judgment cited above were made by the Politburo as a body.

A more likely explanation, however, is that the former KGB boss was never the sophisticate that wishful thinkers inside and outside the Soviet Union hoped him to be.

Intelligence agency chiefs do not necessarily get reliable information; their minions have a tendency to tell them what they want to hear. Andropov may have collected Western literature and music, as some people said, but he had little direct experience with Westerners. Most of what he knew about the outside world was filtered through a large bureaucracy.

The late Llewelyn Thompson, when ambassador to Moscow, once said that there probably wasn't a secret in the Western world that was really safe from Soviet intelligence—but that he nonetheless doubted that Soviet decision-makers really understood what went in Washington and other Western capitals.

In any event, neither of the above explanations is very comforting as we begin the process of dealing with Andropov's successor, Konstantin U. Chernenko.

If the full Politburo was responsible for the gross miscalculations of the Andropov period, virtually the same Politburo is still in business—with presumably the same propensity for mistakes in judgment—now that Andropov is gone.

If faulty intelligence was the culprit, there is no reason to believe that Chernenko—who lacks Andropov's long record of direct experience with the intelligence bureaucracy—will be any more capable of rising above bad information.

Obviously, Soviet blunders may rebound in some instances to the temporary advantage of the United States and its allies. But it is easy to imagine cases in which mistaken judgments in a time of crisis could have dangerous consequences for us all.

Let's hope that Chernenko proves to have a better grip on reality than the man who lies freshly buried beside the Kremlin wall.

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